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# Arms for Hostages, 1980 Version

*A Strange Tale of Iran, Arms Dealers and the John Anderson Campaign*J  
By Alton Frye

**T**HE DEAL WAS the same: arms to Iran for hostages. But the year was 1980, and the complications extended not only to Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, but to the presidential candidacy of independent John B. Anderson.

Within weeks after war erupted between Iran and Iraq in September 1980, Tehran was growing desperate for military supplies. The shah's departure had thrown the Iranian military into disarray. Because of their previous close contact with the American military, officers were finding it difficult to overcome the suspicions of the ayatollahs and the revolutionary guards. Thus Iran's military capacities were in sharp decline. Now Iran's need for spare parts and other supplies intersected the protracted negotiations to free Americans then held hostage in Tehran.

Signals of a possible "arms-for-hostages" trade came from an Iranian who had served as an agent in earlier sales of F-14 aircraft to the shah's government. Apparently acting on behalf of Iranian President Bani-Sadr, the man sought unsuccessfully to make contact directly with senior officials of the Carter administration. A few days after the war began, he turned to an American attorney with whom he had dealt previously—Mitchell Rogovin. At that point the situation became a volatile mixture of international intrigue and domestic politics—for Rogovin was serving as general counsel in the presidential campaign of John Anderson.

Rogovin immediately came to me as Anderson's director of policy planning. The accident of Rogovin's prior acquaintance with the Iranian intermediary presented us with an extraordinary dilemma. To involve Anderson in negotiations regarding the hostages—directly or indirectly—was too dicey to contemplate. Yet, if the overture had any substance at all, it had to be brought to the president's attention. With Anderson's approval we met with Harold Saunders, the assistant secretary of state handling the hostage crisis.

Saunders heard us out and asked the right questions. How could we be sure the agent represented those for whom he claimed to speak? Previous maneuvers to release the hostages had collapsed when contacts in Iran proved incapable of carrying out their commitments. Did this man speak for authorities who could actually deliver the Americans to freedom? Rogovin and I took no position on the merits of the proposed exchange, but we undertook to determine if the approach was valid and reliable.

**W**hen we resumed discussions with the Iranian, we pressed for credible evidence that he was authorized to act and that those he represented were in a position to bargain. He resolved the first question conclusively by producing a lengthy computer print-out providing parts numbers and specifications in such detail that they could only have come from the Iranian air force. Most of the equipment was for F-4 and F-14 aircraft, the mainstays of the Iranian force. The Iranians also wanted Phoenix missiles, the most sophisticated weaponry for the F-14s.

A We conveyed the parts list to Saunders for review within the government. On Oct. 5, CIA Director Stansfield Turner briefed Anderson on the war situation and indicated that it would be difficult for the United States to provide Iran anything so potent as the Phoenix missiles, but we inferred that supplying some materiel might not be out of the question.

Meanwhile, we probed for a better sense of the agent's ability to guarantee results, if the United States were willing to meet the request. A series of exchanges, interrupted for communications with Tehran, produced a straightforward offer to fly the hostages to Pakistan or another mutually agreeable location, where the Iranians would pick up a plane load of the most urgently needed supplies. But there was an even more forthcoming offer. To demonstrate their good faith, the Iranians would release American chargé d'affaires Bruce Laingen in advance of any deliveries. These developments, too, Rogovin and I reported to the State Department.

When reports of a possible swap of weapons for hostages began to surface in the press, our suspicions flared, for we knew that we were not the source. Bani-Sadr was obviously trying to use the option to bolster his standing in Tehran, and we speculated that Carter might manage to turn the possibility into an "October surprise" with decisive impact on the election. Failing that, we worried that our role as message-bearers might be used against Anderson, if the deal went sour. The irony did not escape us that the overture conveyed by the Anderson camp might rescue Jimmy Carter, even if it did not save the hostages.

We now know that a number of factors were converging to produce a measured offer by the Carter administration that ran in a broadly parallel direction to that suggested in the approach we conveyed. In

mid-October the president approved a message offering to make available \$150 million in aircraft parts and other equipment previously ordered by the shah's government, but being held in U.S. warehouses. As Carter put it in the debate with Ronald Reagan on Oct. 28, "If the hostages are released safely . . . we would make delivery on those items which Iran owns."

Strangely, the Iranians never acknowledged the offer. Then, as now, in bargaining with fanaticism, pragmatism has little leverage.

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